

A few personal reflection about the life and teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi for the modern lay monastic

PEOPLE WILL DO ANYTHING THAN FACE THEIR OWN SOULS

There is something archetypal about St. Francis, something that rises from deep within us when we meet him, something we find in Assisi itself. It walks the streets unseen, it comes invisibly around corners wearing a fiery cloak that fans the air like the wings of seraphs hot with God.

What is this something, and why do so many feel it rising within them as they pass through the gates of a medieval mountain town whose very name is a variation of the old Italian word “**accesi**,” which means, “**I have risen**”? Dante says it is Francis himself, who, like the sun, rose upon the earth and was still a mere dawn when we began to feel the warmth and light his rising brought us:

Therefore, whoever seeks to name this place
Should not say, “Assisi.” That would not do it.
Rather say, “The Rising,” to name what happened there.
For the sun wasn’t long in its rising
When he began to warm and lighten the earth
With the comfort of his great power.

People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls. They will practice Indian yoga and all its exercises, observe a strict regimen of diet, learn theosophy by heart, or mechanically repeat mystic texts from literature of the whole world – all because they cannot get on with themselves and have not the slightest faith that anything useful could ever come out of their own souls. Thus the soul has gradually been turned into a Nazareth from which nothing good can come....

But something good does come from Nazareth, and so I close my eyes and lips and pray in that secret place called soul, waiting for him to come who is Son, and for him to raise me up who is Father. And therein begins all mystic experience in me, instead of doing frantically all sorts of things to “make “ him love me. I keep trying to prove I’m good by doing, giving, thereby pre-empting God, not letting him come to me first, not receiving. And I do this because I am afraid he really does not love me as the beautiful work of his own loins, but only if I win his love.

The so-called Peace Prayer of St. Francis has the line, “It is in giving that we receive,” but that can only be prayed well by one who knows that it is only “in receiving that we give.” For God has first loved us, and given himself to us, and that is what we learn from the mystics like St. Francis, who are brave enough to close their eyes and lips and listen. Then what begins to rise in us is that which has been lifted up by him who comes in love, and what he lifts up is the heart itself, rising from within to meet the Love descending to embrace it.

This is what I’ve learned in Assisi, in the unhurried land of Umbria, from St. Francis, who in summer gave of himself in compassion to others on the road, but in winter returned to the mountaintop and entered the cave with closed eyes and lips, and waited. Had he remained on the road, his giving would only have been to prove to himself that he was as good as his good works proclaimed he was. Had he remained always in the cave, blind and silent, he would only have proved his own self- absorption instead of that meeting with him who raises up and

draws out the heart to follow him down the mountain where he summons in those his embrace has led us to embrace.

This, too, then I have learned. And these pages are the words of him who taught it to me, of him who learned the lesson and the words by closing his eyes and lips and waiting. These are the words St. Francis spoke after that prayer which is a closing of the eyes and lips to pray to one's Father in secret. These are the words I've heard wherever or whenever I read the words of Francis with my own eyes and my own lips sealed.

WE NEED ONE ANOTHER TO DO WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO

In our stressful world today, there is a growing need for genuine friends who will respect our individuality and spiritual beliefs without trying to convert us to their ways. Those who are spiritually inclined who have already begun their search for personal intimacy with their God/Dess, appreciate the importance of engaging with those of like mind.

Only God and Lord Kutumi knows the full spiritual impact of the message that they gave to the therapists of the Sean Bradley Academy back in July 2006. From that seedbed of receiving a simple message to establish the Tau Interfaith Community of St. Francis to the present day, none anticipated where it would lead except to say that they attribute the effectiveness of their combined efforts to the importance of remaining faithful to God and to the vision they received in 2006. Their friendship and commitment to encourage one another against all the odds is what made the difference in their lives. Because of human nature, the students, all but two, have drifted away from holding the vision because of their human expectations that God would deliver there and then!

All of the work within the Tau Community of St. Francis is accomplished through people who are honest with one another, committed to serve one another, and willing to receive wise council from one another. When we build trust, we will work together smoothly and see God at work in and through us. Yes, to be men and women of integrity and productive members within the Tau Community of Interfaith Franciscans, we need one another.

*We share a common bond of love
That comes from God our Father,
And we're dependent on the strength
We draw from one another. Sper.*

Human nature is a wonderful window on man's true need for God. Why? I sense it is because we get so carried away with enthusiasm with our pet projects that when we encounter delays or frustrations, we soon throw the towel in by surrendering to defeat! Brother Rob says that when I am busy around the monastery, I remind him of an 'express train.' How awful for those who get in his way for fear of running them down. A gentle reminder not to get caught up in a flurry of high activity and remember the need to slow down but not give up! In the Gospels, we are reminded by Jesus of an incident when he called to visit three of His nearest and dearest where he knew He would get rest from His labours. On His arrival there was poor Martha busy like Brother Sean trying to do too much too soon and getting all fractious and bad tempered whilst Mary sat at the Lord's feet pondering on His words. I dare say that Martha's looks were enough to set the forest ablaze with the fires of discontent within her heart.

THE WORLD CROWNS QUICK SUCCESS; GOD CROWNS LONG-TERM FAITHFULNESS

In the Bible, the life of faith is often described as a walk (Gen. 17:1.). for most of us, our spiritual pilgrimage involves plodding, a pace that sometimes feels unspiritual and unproductive. My dictionary defines plodding as “making one’s way slowly and perseveringly.”

Two of God’s earliest plodders, Abraham and Sarah, trusted God’s promises even though they had to wait many years for those promises to be fulfilled (Heb. 11: 8-12). Another example of productive plodding is Tau Interfaith Community of St. Francis. We wait patiently upon God to deliver the small holding where we can unite as members of the monastic community and start work in earnest.

There is another wonderful example of a God’s plodder is William Carey. A shoemaker by trade, Carey became a scholar, linguist, and a father of modern missions. He lived by this motto:

“ *Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.*” In old age, he made one thing clear, however: “If, after my removal, anyone should think it worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge of its correctness. If he gives me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much.” Then he added, “I can plod....To this I owe everything.” Are you fulfilling your God given responsibilities patiently by faith, or do you feel like giving up? God want you to be a purposeful plodder.

*Day by day perform your mission
With Christ's help keep at your tasks;
Be encouraged by His presence-
Faithfulness is all He asks. Boschi.*

FAITH IS THE ABILITY TO SEE GOD IN THE DARK

When I was a young inexperienced nursing monk, I disliked the story of Abraham going to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac. Why would God tell Abraham to do such a thing? My Novice Master assured me that God was testing Abraham’s faith. And he past that test. Even with the knife in his hand, Abraham believed God (Gen. 22: 8-10). He had learned that the Lord could be trusted.

It is easy to make a profession of faith. But the real test comes when God asks us to lay our dearest treasures on the line. As with Abraham, the issue becomes one of obedience. A business woman lost a high-paying job because she wouldn’t compromise her standards. And a pastor was driven from his church when he obeyed God’s Word and spoke out about racism in his congregation.

Shouldn’t these people have been rewarded when they did the right thing? Faith meets its toughest test when we feel the Lord has not rewarded our faithfulness.

You may be faced with giving back to God something you feel He has given you. Learn to see this test as an opportunity to demonstrate your faith in the One who always keeps His promises – even when you don’t understand.

*Be still, my soul – the Lord is on your side!
Be patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide –*

In every change He faithful will remain. von Schlegel.

The above illustration may come as a bolt of lightning for anyone who is trying to discern a way forward regarding God's plans for their lives. So many of us get stuck in our own issues! In reality, we find it difficult coping with simplicity and when we follow the advice of St. Francis to close down our lips and ears in meditation, then we are able to connect with our hearts. If we persist in always having the 'last word,' then we will not hear God's Spirit speak to our hearts in silent prayer. So many today, cannot see or even hear the voice God because they are frenetically busy and hence to the old saying, 'they cannot see wood for the trees.'

Forty years of trying to do things my way, finally caught up with me, when in May 2008, I was left with a temporary paralysis in my lower spine that stopped me in my tracks! There was nowhere to run away too from God. He had me where He wanted me to face my irrational fears about monastic life. I have always known in my heart that despite not feeling a sense of belonging in this life, I knew that life without God as a monastic was intolerable and lonely. I recall being told by one of my spiritual directors back in 1990 that the idea of my returning to a conventional Catholic Monastery was out of the question. I asked the question why that was and reminded that the 'Catholic Church wasn't ready for me yet.' So, I plodded along merrily avoiding making any form of commitment to God. By avoiding Him, I sensed that He would forget about me! Not so! December 8th, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, forty years forward from making my First vows to God as a monastic nursing monk, came proof that if we are willing to trust God, then He will show us a way, where there seems to be no way.

The battle that many of us experience in our faith journey should not be seen as a punishment from God. If our stubbornness of heart persists and we continue to 'go it alone,' then we should not be too surprised when Spirit leads us to events that offer us a way out clause. Usually when this happens, we are truly on our knees in despair pleading with our ego to take a one way flight to wherever. The 'Hound of Heaven' never abandons His children because they were formed out of love. Surrendering one's heart to God usually is as a direct result where our ego has been 'publicly humiliated.' This is the only way forward for many whose ego continually dictates how they should live their life. There can be no place for ego in God's ministering unto others as it derails God's Spirit from empowering others to claim their abundance.

The soul that prefer the egoic self to 'walking humbly with their God,' do so at their own peril as lying in the wings is the dreaded 'dark night of the soul' experience that leaves one bereft of God's inner peace. And all we have to do is say, God, you know that I am a stubborn soul, so why bother with my insults and dramas? The response is always the same regardless who we are or, and regardless of what depths we may have fallen into. What's so amazing is that God really does love us with a selfless, unconditional love that cannot be bought- a love that is unlike any other love known to us.

LAY MONASTICISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

The vision which Lord Kutumi (St. Francis) gave to the original members of the Tau Community of Saint Francis was a personal invitation from God to hearts that were receptive to the 'Spiritual Winds of Change.' The vision was more about embracing the Natural World-The Franciscan Soul through simplicity, harmony balance and an abiding love for God through creation. In ancient times, the 'Wise Ones' connected with mankind through nature as well as the elements. The Native American Indians were a special people who had a great reverence for reading the clouds and interpreting messages from their Spirit Elders. Today, if you look around you very few people, if any, take time to look up and see the beauty of what is above them. How many times have you seen the appearances of Angelic Beings of Light in the formation of clouds? How many times have you seen a rainbow?

These are but a few examples of how the Nature Spirits of our ancestors communicate with us and yet we are too busy to see them, even recognise what they are trying to tell us.

Today, so many individuals are showing a real commitment to reconnecting with their soul through entering a new relationship with interreligious study and training for the ministry. Books on spirituality have soared because of man's insatiable thirst for knowledge. There is a growing interest in forsaking city life for the country away from noise and pollution. There are individuals who are hungry to live together in a community where they can share their ideals and grow their food from the earth. So, why the need to be part of a community? Could it be that here one finds a sense of personal fulfilment as well as feeling a sense of identity of belonging?

Being an Oblate within the Tau Interfaith Franciscan's online virtual community is a more gentle approach to living a monastic life in service to God. The dictionary defines the word Oblate as one who is one of the following:

- A dedicated person.
- One who is offered up
- One who is dedicated to the monastic life but not a professed member.

To be an Oblate from one's home, is an ideal opportunity to test the waters before jumping in head first and regretting making the wrong decision. Having entered a conventional monastic order, usually a person discovers several years into their vocation that they realize this life is not for them. When faced with the consequences of their readmission back into society, many individuals have experienced real problems making a safe return back to the real world.

The Tau Family offer each individual a choice to choose their level of commitment as Oblates. You can live this life even as a married person. Being an Oblate in a conventional monastic order is restrictive to the under forties; being single, celibate and that one is a baptised member of that Christian religious faith community. In the Tau Community, neither applies. There are many married individuals who live in a loveless and lifeless marriage whose partner does not accept their interest in religious or spiritual matters. Many such persons feel isolated and lost. So, by offering them the opportunity to escape their reality and feed their spiritual hunger for a more meaningful life as a married person, instead of requesting celibacy, fidelity is what is encouraged. In terms of taking a vow of poverty, we would encourage the person to adopt a spirit of detachment from materialism. In the case of taking a vow of Obedience to God, we would ask that they enter a meaningful relationship with God through their heart with ongoing spiritual guidance from their Spiritual Director and a member of the Pastoral Team from the Tau Community of St. Francis.

The long term vision for the members of the TCOSF, there are Oblates who are ready to live a covenanted life by sharing their material wealth, skills and talents in a real community. To be a member of this community again you can be single or a married couple. Each individual who enters the Oblate training programme is guided to establish their own Rule of Life that fits in with their own religious beliefs and if living the life of an Oblate from their own home, that they ensure they adopt a life that is conducive to their needs. For those who have chosen to share their goods as one vibrant spiritual interfaith community, then they work to the chosen Rule of Life that is already in place to safeguard the whole community.

To become an Oblate means accepting God's personal invitation to share your heart with Him. Many of our members who are currently Friends of the Tau Community are candidates for the Oblate programme. There is no pressure on anyone to become an Oblate as this decision must first come from God to your heart. The choice as to whether you follow that is entirely yours to make. There are those who know that being an Oblate is possibly right for them but they may sense a reluctance

to give up their material possessions that they have worked hard for in life. Here, we need to be clear about what St Francis is saying to our hearts. We are asked to give up nothing as God does not need anything from us because God is God. However, what we are asked to do is 'surrender our ego's to allow our heart experience the absolute joy of being in love with God. There are those who might find that the actual taking of a vow of poverty is nonsensical in today's climate. Or they may sense that it creates a poverty mind set! The vow of poverty is not about giving up anything but has more to say about being set free from the constraints of materialism to allow the heart be free to be one who has been called to Love. Of the many that are being called today by St. Francis to embrace a more simple life of service as Interfaith Oblates, only a few respond and stay the course.

To be invited by St. Francis to be an Oblate as a member of the Interfaith Franciscan Community is a special invitation to dedicate one's life in service to the whole family of God as a Professional Prayer Consultant. In other words, we are given the tools required to develop a direct line to God as equal prayer partners. Please visit the recently updated links re: membership as Oblates in our new website at www.interfaithfranciscans.com

